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The moral geography of food in post-1993 Cuba: Domestic versus tourist sectors

Marisa Wilson, Department of Geography, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine campus, Trinidad & Tobago

E-mail: marisawlsn@gmail.com

***Summary:** The opening of the Cuban economy to tourism and to the United States dollar has had a profound impact on the spaces and subjects of food production, exchange and consumption. While 'luxuries' sold in hard currency are now legally available to a particular subsection of society, namely visitors and privileged Cubans with hard currency, most people remain attached to the state-controlled peso economy as they only receive peso wages. In this article I argue that the uneven development of Cuba's food retail sector has led to inequalities in access and accessibility, and that these disparities are justified and contested in moral terms. The paper reveals how Cuba's long-term dream of political and economic sovereignty affects the way food is produced and consumed on the island.*

Key Words

GEOGRAPHIES OF FOOD FOOD SOVEREIGNTY CUBA

Introduction

The spatial politics of food in Cuba are changing. Since 1993 when Cuba opened up its retail food sector to the United States dollar (replaced by the Cuban Convertible dollar, or CUC, in late 2004), food available in pesos to Cubans has been increasingly scarce whilst newly-legalized outlets offer more expensive and higher-quality food in hard currency. The unevenness of food availability and access in Cuba is creating frustrations on the ground; but the revolutionary project to defend Cuba's domestic economy from outside influences is used to justify present scarcities (see Wilson, 2012; Wilson in press).

The moral economy of Cuban socialism and nationhood is as important today as it was in the late 19th century, when the first revolutionary 'fight' (*lucha*) for social, political and economic sovereignty began. As historian of Cuba, Antoni Kapcia (2000: xvi), argues:

'[A]ll Cuban history since the late eighteenth-century can justifiably be seen as the trajectory of the pursuit of a 'dream' – of true independence ... It has been a dream that, at certain low points, has become more dream-like ..., but that has always remained as a shared vision. ... [T]he one thing that has sustained popular support, cemented unity, fortified collective resolve and rallied flagging commitment over the years [including the post-1990s]

has been the shared willingness to go on believing in, striving for and defending that 'dream'.

The 'dream' of Cuban nationhood and, now, socialism, provides a moral and political justification for recent scarcities in Cuba. In both spaces of governance and everyday spaces of livelihood struggles, forms of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) emphasize the ideals of Cuban socialism, particularly Guevara's idea of the 'new man' who values material items in social rather than self-interested ways (Silverman, 1971; Guevara, 1971; Tablada 1990 [1987]). As Antoni Kapcia (2000) has argued, Guevara's model for Cuban society coincides with Cuba's long-term project to defend itself in the face of outside, mercantile interests.

In this brief article I would like to illustrate how inequalities wrought by the opening of the Cuban food economy to hard currency and tourism are experienced, justified and contested in moral terms. Explicitly, I ask how socio-economic inclusions and exclusions in Cuba's food economy are shaped and legitimated by moral ideals of Cuban socialism and nationalism. Implicitly, I question whether national unity under such conditions is sustainable in the long run, especially given present injustices in the Cuban food system.

The institutionalization of Cuban unity must be questioned on these terms, for as Amartya Sen (2009: 83) argues:

'the actual success in generating good social realizations is thoroughly contingent on varying social, economic, political and cultural circumstances. Institutional fundamentalism may not only ride roughshod over the complexity of societies, but quite often the self-satisfaction that goes with alleged institutional wisdom even prevents critical examination of the actual consequences of having the recommended institutions'.

In light of the need to test Cuban institutions with empirical knowledge, my methodology is mostly ethnographic, collected in the study area ('Tuta'), from September 2005 to July 2007.

Given the nature of this research, collected for over 15 months in a 'humble' home located in a rural area of Cuba, much of the information presented here is experientially-based (though this data is backed up with long-term historical, primary and secondary research, which provides the ethnographer with an understanding of which experiences and knowledges are shared by her informants). The points made are provisional and testable, of use to future researchers who ask similar questions concerning morality, food security and justice in Cuba and possibly elsewhere. The ethnographic material introduced at the end of the article is based on my own experiences of scarcity, hardship and solidarity in Cuba. Understanding how people live and understand 'the good life' through a long-term period of living with them is essential for developing knowledge about everyday life and livelihood struggles, a kind of knowledge about a place that differs from that of outsiders who visit the island on periodic visits.

As soon as the researcher can no longer base the validity of her affirmations on her stance of radical exteriority, the definitiveness of the description comes into question. In such cases the researcher is obliged, in her description, to adhere as closely as possible to

the procedure the actors themselves use in establishing proof in a given situation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: 12).

Food scarcities and national sovereignty

In 'Tuta', a town of about 10,000 inhabitants located 30kms southwest of Havana city (which I have disguised to protect the identities of those mentioned), people have long relied on state redistributive outlets selling basic foodstuffs in pesos to secure their daily alimentary needs. Since 1993, however, Tutaños and other Cubans have faced growing class distinctions and new economic choices, both resulting from the opening of internal food markets to global market forces (for related work on changes to agricultural markets in Cuba, see Wilson, 2009). Like the global food economy, which has brought unequal benefits from deregulation and the proliferation of 'global production networks' (Dickenson, 2004: 19), the restructuring of the Cuban food economy since the early 1990s has been highly uneven. Indeed, only some people in Cuba, most often non-Cubans, have access to foods in high demand like lobster and beef.

The growing and visible arena outside national distribution outlets reflects contradictions between food treated as a basic entitlement in the socialist economy and food treated as a desirable commodity in the market. This economic and moral separation is upheld by Cuban policymakers, who insist upon a model of national food sovereignty that treats food as a public good rather than a private commodity. In this model, Cuban citizens work to produce a national basket of foodstuffs, receiving their 'just' due from the state in return.

The concept of food sovereignty in Cuba is linked to this idea of a contract between the state and its citizens, and it is this link between *national* sovereignty and food security that makes the concept as used in Cuba different from its origin in other Latin American countries. The first use of the term food sovereignty began in 1996 when it was introduced by the Via Campesina (Peasant Road), a 'peasant' movement that emerged in Latin America that has now become a global movement (Desmarais, 2007). While Via Campesina shares with Cuba a resistance to the market-based interpretation of food as a pure commodity, its use of the term food sovereignty is geared towards the autonomy of individual peasants and peasant communities. By contrast, the concept of food sovereignty as used in Cuba is more aligned with its historical 'dream' of *national* autonomy (Rosset & Benjamin, 1994; Funes *et al.*, 2002). Thus as Raul Castro stated in 1994:

'In the difficult and unchanging geopolitical and geoeconomic conditions of Cuba, food security is an important way to preserve our sovereignty and national security' (cited and paraphrased by Valdés 2003: 399).

In 2004, the Cuban government linked the idea of food security to both food sovereignty and political and economic independence (Wright, 2008: 39). Raul Castro, the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias) and the Union of Communist Youth (Union de Jovenes Comunistas) now produce for their own subsistence as well as for the state redistributive system. Agricultural production is partially replacing the 2-year military service requirement for all young men in Cuba (*ibid.*), and the new motto to organize land and mobilize labour is: 'beans over bullets' (Eckstein,

2003: 28). The aim of this political and ideological shift is to introduce a new sector of farmers who harvest mostly vegetables and tubers for their own consumption, thereby decreasing pressure on the state for food rations, but who also donate food to the Acopio, the state redistributive system. Food donated to the latter is then distributed to workers via ration centres or at discounted rates at state markets and stores.

But policies for food sovereignty in Cuba, which assume an isolated national system of distribution, stand in stark contrast to some sectors of the Cuban food economy that are necessarily attached to global markets. Indeed, while the economy for national consumption is still based on closed networks of production and distribution of basic needs, that of the tourist and hard currency retail sectors is inevitably attached to the world of consumer demand and desire.

Like the opening of the Cuban economy to tourism, which occurred at roughly the same time (and to which I shall soon return), the government's decision to open up stores selling products in hard currency made inequalities between, for example, people with or without access to remittances, visible to ordinary Cubans. Indeed the ratio of lowest to highest incomes in Cuba has changed from 1/5 in the 1980s to 1/71 during and after the 1990s (Fabienke, 2001: 102). Because of these dramatic shifts in access, it has become increasingly noticeable that only some people can afford to purchase things in CUCs, often of a better quality (i.e. CUC beer versus peso beer) while others have to make do with peso purchases or save 25 or more pesos to buy an item worth \$1.10 in global markets.

Though most Cubans are still paid in pesos according to the officially-set exchange rate (1 CUC = 1 peso), prices of foodstuffs not available from the state are now largely aligned with the world market exchange rate (1 CUC = 25 pesos = US\$1.10). Thus a bottle of vegetable oil that costs 2 CUCs in a hard currency store is sold at 50 pesos in the petty trade sector (whether legally or illegally). Another bottle of oil, usually of a much lower quality, may be available at a state store for 2 pesos, made equivalent to CUCs through state subsidies. However, as Cubans I met put it, the state kiosk is likely to be 'peeled' (*pelado*; empty), so they will need to purchase the oil for 2 CUCs or 50 pesos. Given the average daily salary in Cuba of 18 pesos (about US\$0.75, according to 2008 estimates of the Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas, Cuban National Office of Statistics), purchasing this simple cooking oil would take nearly three days of work!

Uneven distribution and moral-political justification

Because the Cuban state under Raul Castro continues to uphold the socialist economic model, according to which pesos are valued more as tokens to satisfy *need* than money to satisfy *desires*, acquisition and use of the other currency – CUCs – is a morally-charged activity. According to the socialist model that Cuba adopted in the early 1960s, workers and farmers create and protect collective or sovereign property, which is in turn redistributed to secure the 'needs' of all members of society. Since this system depends on the internal control of goods as well as money, pesos work as tokens used to buy state-defined necessities rather than money that may allow one to purchase an unimaginable array of commodities (Holbraad, 2000: 9). Consequently, open access to hard currency and 'lux-

ury' goods such as beef and lobster is a double-edged sword – both desirable and, according to some Tutaños, 'dangerous' (*peligroso*), especially if accepted in public from tourists with hard currency. During fieldwork, moral distinctions were made between Cubans with 'culture' (*cultura*) who work hard for pesos, and tourist hustlers (*jineteros/as*) 'without culture' (*no hay cultura*), whose sole objective was to get CUCs or 'luxury' items to satisfy personal desires (see Wilson in press).

This cultural reasoning, which implicitly separates the world of entitlements through work from the world of commodities and self-interest, is continuous with Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's ideal of the 'New Man of Socialism' (1971):

'It is not a question of how many kilograms of meat are eaten or how many pretty imported things can be bought with present wages. It is rather that the individual feels greater fulfillment [in work], that he has greater inner wealth and many more responsibilities in our country, the individual knows that the glorious period in which it has fallen to him to live is one of sacrifice' (Guevara, 1971: 352).

In contrast to the ever-increasing accumulation of private property by individuals who, in theory, determine prices in global markets, in the state model that Cuba adopted in the early 1960s individuals work to create and protect collective assets or social property. The latter is, in turn, redistributed as use values (rather than exchange values, measured in terms of price) to secure the needs of all members of society.

The Guevarian model of communism is continuous with the long-term values of Cuba as a revolutionary society, since 'collective property' and other Marxist concepts have, over time, come to be associated with defending the nation against imperialistic and self-interested outsiders (Kapcia, 2000). Since the early 1990s, however, domestic spaces for food production and consumption have collided with spaces determined by the global world of commodities. Spatial coincidences between the two different economies and currencies do not mirror moral concurrences, however, and the discrepancy between the two creates and renews inequalities between insiders and outsiders.

During the 2005-07 period at least, Cuban citizens were not allowed to enter into most tourist establishments, especially restaurants and hotels (this has since changed, though most Cubans do not earn enough CUCs to patronize these places). The segregation policy was not put into writing, but it did happen in practice, especially in Havana where the tourist/Cuban mix was more apparent (for more on segregation in Cuba, particularly its racial underpinnings, see Roland, 2006). The moral justification for distinguishing between the tourist market and domestic distribution is that national returns from tourism are used 'for the good of all'. In a similar fashion, profits for fruit and other expensive produce available only to tourists should ideally be used to ensure the well-being and autonomy of the national community. An article in *El Habanero* newspaper published on 19 January 2007 outlined the progress of a new, government-funded project to increase fruit production in Havana province. At the very end of the article, the author added: 'For the moment all harvests are for tourism, which benefits the whole population' (Cuesta Álvarez, 2007: 2; cited in Wilson, in press).

The more visible the 'alternative' economy in Cuba becomes, the more apparent it is to ordinary Cubans that there are differences in access and availability between their

local markets and peso stores, on one hand, and stores that sell commodities in hard currency, on the other. Indeed, while the Cuban state sees tourism as benefiting all Cubans, many Tutaños I interviewed felt left out. Frustrations were most evident in regards to 'luxury' products such as beef, which was monopolized by the revolutionary government early on. When in the early 1960s dairy farmers in Cuba threatened to stop producing beef, all the pasture areas in Cuba were nationalized, all ears of cattle tagged (interview 19/5/07). As one Tutaño man said, pointing to a group of scattered cows chewing cud on a vast area of state land, 'Now all cows are Fidel's cows'.

Like beef, quality fish and seafood are also monopolized by the state for the tourist and export markets (*ibid.*). Very rarely are these products available via state outlets (and at a much lower quality and quantity than those sold in the tourist market), and Tutaños were wary of black-market sales unless they knew the person selling the fish or crab personally. Blue crab, or 'the Cubans' lobster,' was available to Tutaños, though I tried it only once. With hindsight, I wish I had subjected the so-called 'lobster' to what Cuban workers call the 'cat test': feeding the food to a cat to see it is safe to eat: 'workers and professionals have no choice but to turn to the 'cat test'. What they do is give a small portion of their food to some cat, a test to see if the animal can eat it without throwing up or ending up with food poisoning' (Valera, 2012: 1).

When a *paladar* (a private restaurant with limited seats) opened just one kilometre outside of Tuta serving (real) lobster and beef in pesos, it seemed that problems of access were improving. The restaurant was short lived, however, because the beef and lobster were sourced illegally. The closure of the *paladar*, which was primarily for the benefit of Tutaño consumers, signified to Tutaños the growing divide between food for domestic consumption and food for tourists. As one friend infuriated by the closing of the *paladar* exclaimed, in an ironic twist on the morality of collective ownership: '*¡Los turistas son los dueños aquí!* (The tourists are the owners here!; cited in Wilson, in press)'.

Conclusion

Morals are social products shaped by historical and geographical conditions (Lee & Smith, 2004: 3); they are an essential means for human geographers to understand spatial differentiations between people, nature and things. I have argued in this article that recent differentiations in the spaces of food exchange and consumption in Cuba between, for example, tourist and domestic food outlets, have led to growing inequalities, and that this state of affairs is both defended and contested in moral and nationalist terms.

A question for further research is to link this moral geographical research on Cuba to more universal perspectives on social justice and injustice (i.e. Sen, 1999), a project I am presently edging towards. For now, it is clear that the criteria for what is just and unjust in Cuba are largely based on the moral norms of the particular version of socialism that those in power have adopted over time.

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